

Cicero's Stoic Paradoxes - General

Post by "Cassius" of November 19, 2024 at 7:32 AM

Thank you for posting this Matteng! This is not something I recall running into recently, and I think it will serve as a very good thing for us to review. I haven't yet had a chance to read the full article, but I see that the full work being referenced is available in a Rackham translation [here](#), pages 252-305.

As you indicate, we will definitely wish to go through these and discuss what would be the expected Epicurean response to each one. I think we'll likely want to devote one or more podcast episodes to this as well. This list makes it easy to highlight the Stoic-Epicurean divide.

The [wikipedia](#) page is here, giving the following summary of the five major propositions, of which on first glance I would say -- just looking at the titles -- that Epicurus would definitely dispute 1, 3, and 6, on their face. The others are also dependent on the meaning attached to the word "virtue," but on first glance I'd say would require more explanation than do 1, 3, and 6, which I'd say are flatly wrong on their face. I am very tempted to put 2 in the same category as flatly wrong, but a complete discussion of it would require going through [PD05](#).

I: Virtue is the only good

In this book Cicero presents the Stoic classifications of what elements of life are genuinely good, and what elements are not good. There are three different qualities of something being genuinely good: righteousness (*rectum*), intrinsic honor or nobility (*honestum*), and intrinsic virtue (*cum virtute*). This can be understood as the inner person, and the choices and actions that they engage in.

Pleasure and wealth cannot be genuine goods because they lack the crucial properties that a genuine good should have.^[3] Genuine goods should satisfy desire and make their possessor happy.^[3] Spurious or apparent goods do not satisfy desires, but rather, arouse yet more desire, as well as fear that one might lose these things that they presently possess.^[3] Cicero also argues that something cannot be a good if an evil person can possess it.^[3] Thus wealth and pleasure cannot be a genuine good.^[3]

Humans alone among all animals possess reason, and this alone allows humans to pursue the good.^[5] The good therefore should be defined exclusively in rational terms and thus the moral life should be ordered according to reason.^[5]

II: Virtue is sufficient for happiness

Virtue is all that is needed for happiness.^[8] Happiness depends on a possession which cannot be lost, and this only applies to things within our control.^[5]

III: All the vices and all virtues are equal

All good deeds are equally meritorious and all bad deeds equally heinous.^[4] All virtues are equal as this corresponds to the same impulse towards the good.^[5] Cicero does not attempt to defend the Stoic position of the moral equality of all offenses; instead he offers a weakened version that offenses of the same sort are equal.^[3] He notes the Stoic position that all crimes are equal since they all involve the same intent to break the law, but he then argues that crimes do not bear the same penalty since the matter depends on the status of the person injured and that of the criminal.^[5] Thus he ends up imposing gradations of vice based on external factors.^[5]

IV: All fools are mad

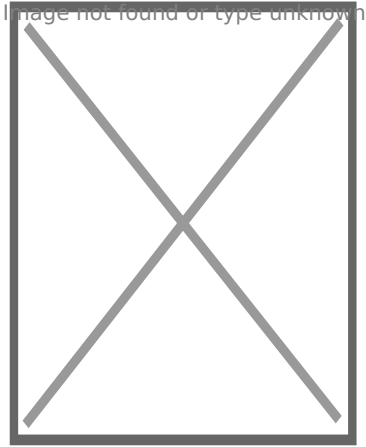
There is a substantial [lacuna](#) at the beginning of this section.^[3] The remaining part argues that every fool is an exile and the wise person cannot be harmed.^[3] Cicero attacks an unnamed personal enemy for causing his exile.^[5] The essay is thought to be a thinly veiled attack on Cicero's enemy [Clodius](#).^[4] Cicero asserts that his own exile was not a hardship since he possessed the correct Stoic wisdom and virtue.^[5]

V: The sage alone is free

Only the [sage](#) is free and every fool is a slave.^[8] Cicero attacks an unnamed military leader who is unworthy of command because he cannot control his passions and thus is not free.^[5] The target here may be [Lucullus](#).^[4] Cicero satirizes costly luxury and affectation of connoisseurship in collecting works of art.^[4] Freedom involves the rational control of one's will. Only the sage is free since he freely chooses the good.^[5]

VI: Only the wise person is rich

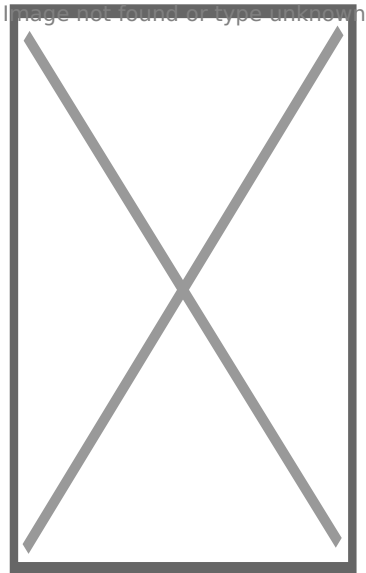
If a rich person's wealth is measured by the quantity of their goods, then a wealthy person with no virtue is poor, since virtue is the only good.^[3] People confuse reasonable needs with unreasonable desires and this leads people in power to pursue irrational passions.^[5]



[Cicero De Oratore, Vol.-ii : H. Rackham : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

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Alternate Translation by Cyrus Edmonds:



[Cicero's three books Of offices; or, Moral duties; also his Cato Major, an essay on old age; Laelius, an essay on friendship; Paradoxes; Scipio's dream: and Letter to Quintus on the duties of a magistrate. Literally translated, with notes, designed to...](#)

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Cyrus Edmonds commentary on Stoicism from this text page 264:

Quote

The ethical doctrines of the Stoics have attracted most attention, as exhibited in the lives of distinguished Greeks and Romans. To live according to nature was the basis of their ethical system ; but by this it was not meant that a man should follow his own particular nature ; he must make his life conformable to the nature of the whole of things. This principle is the foundation of all morality; and it follows that morality is connected with philosophy. To know what is our relation to the whole of things, is to know what we ought to be and to do. This fundamental principle of the Stoics is indisputable, but its application is not always easy, nor did they all agree in their exposition of it. Some things were good, some bad, and some indifferent ; the only good things were virtue; wisdom, justice, temperance, and the like. The truly wise man possesses all knowledge ; he is perfect and sufficient in himself ; he despises all that subjects to its power the rest of mankind ; he feels pain, but he is not conquered by it. But the morality of the Stoics, at least in the later periods, though it rested on a basis apparently so sound, permitted the wise man to do nearly everything that he liked. Such a system, it has been well observed, might do for the imaginary wise man of the Stoics ; but it was not a system whose general adoption was compatible with the existence of any actual society.